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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the Rhone-Alpes region's policy for the development of alternating training based on cooperation between the occupational branches and the national educational system. It discusses the following: France's 1987 law on apprenticeship that provided an opportunity for its emergence; cooperative apprenticeship as the culmination of every educational path; and 1992-93 results that indicate that the training flow from cooperative apprenticeship remained modest. The article provides explanations for this modest development, the most important of which is the ambiguity of the cooperation agreement among the three main partners: Regional Council, occupational branches, and national educational system. Four kinds of alternating units that emerged from initiatives are described: the occupational branches, large companies' initiatives for incorporating high quality apprenticeship in their human relations management policies, predominance of training centers, and mobilization of local activity sectors and institutions. Forms of organization and regulation necessary to transition from experimentation to innovation are outlined. (YLB)

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Regional Policy and Innovation: A French-Style Dual System?

For some, the dual system is a model, for others, a structure specific to German society, but whatever the case, its example has brought alternating school-company training to the fore of the French debate on the training-employment relationship [Bertrand, Durand-Drouhin, Romani 1994]. In 1988, in the context of the recent decentralisation,[1] the Rhône-Alpes region chose to promote an original policy for the development of alternating training based on close co-operation between the occupational branches and the national educational system.[2] Although its quantitative impact still remains limited, this "co-operative apprenticeship" nonetheless demonstrates the feasibility of innovative approaches to the training-employment relationship. The establishment of clear rules for the different partners remains an obstacle to its continued expansion, however.

A HARSH DIAGNOSIS

The initial observation that motivated the Rhône-Alpes region's policy in 1987 was twofold:

• A higher youth unemployment rate in France (22.9 % of the 15-24 age group in 1987) than in most other industrialised countries, notably in Germany (8.5 %);[3]

• An educational system held to be isolated from economic and occupational realities and thus giving rise to:

- A strict hierarchy of knowledge privileging general knowledge and abstract reasoning over know-how;

- A loss of social status for vocational training programmes and the jobs associated with them, which led young people and their families to favour the pursuit of the general studies that are considered more "respectable";

- The national educational system's overly autonomous role in regulating the flows of school-based vocational training.

THE REGIONAL PROJECT: REBUILDING THE VOCATIONAL TRAINING SYSTEM

In view of this analysis, the 1987 law on apprenticeship provided an "opportunity" that allowed for the emergence of another policy. Concretely, it permitted all vocational and technical education diplomas, including higher education, to be prepared for within an apprenticeship context. It thus offered the possibility of improving the image of a track that depends on the interaction of practical know-how and general and technical knowledge to create an effective occupational competence. In principle, it paved the way for an alternating training programme that would no longer be limited to the artisanal apprenticeship commonly perceived as a last resort for students unable to succeed in the French school system's general training programmes.

Inspired by the German model, an industrial apprenticeship enhanced by the recruitment practices of major companies thus became conceivable, while Level IV (the *baccalauréat*) was the minimum standard in the national education strategy. The Regional Council's objective was to develop "co-operative apprenticeship" by placing the national educational system in close co-operation with the occupational branches, notably by eliminating the split between an "autonomous apprenticeship" carried out in

1. See **"In Focus"** below.
2. This article presents the main conclusions of an evaluation study commissioned by the Rhône-Alpes Regional Council. The complete results of this study will be published in Céreq's Etudes et Documents series (see Bibliography at the end of this article).
3. See Elbaum and Marchand (1993).

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training centres run by employers' organisations and the technical instruction mainly dispensed in the public schools.[4] Given the importance of the diploma in French society, the model places particular emphasis on national certification for alternating training programmes.

The regional project thus recognised the national educational system's efforts over the previous ten years to upgrade vocational and technical education, notably by revising the system of reference for diplomas and jobs in collaboration with employers. In particular, it seized the opportunity presented by the creation of the vocational *baccalauréats* which are intended to train highly skilled factory and office workers.

CO-OPERATIVE APPRENTICESHIP: THE CULMINATION OF EVERY EDUCATIONAL PATH

The regional proposal is based on a conception of vocational training which, "contingent on economic activity,. . . should 'attach itself' to the needs of job-creating companies" [Millon and Emerard 1993]. According to the regional promoters, these companies are faced with economic, technological and organisational changes that accentuate the need for relying on initial and continuing vocational training that is doubly flexible, in terms of the *adaptation* of occupational contents and the *adjustment* of trainee numbers to company needs. The regional policy functions according to four principles:

• Every young person should complete his or her initial curriculum by an alternating training programme geared to creating occupational know-how. The widespread implementation of the structure is the guarantee of an improved social image for alternating training, which would otherwise run the risk of being continually overshadowed by general training.

The only real alternating training takes place under a work contract, which implies the wholehearted commitment of the company to setting up the training and qualification and institutionalises the young person's involvement in carrying out the job.

• Validation and evaluation should be based more on effective skills than on knowledge, thus giving greater importance to occupational experience developped in the work situation.

• The regulation of flows should be directed by the employers' organisations, which not only represent the companies but ensure overall coherence.

Alternating training under a work contract thus fits into a "training itinerary" whose length varies according to the level of studies: such an itinerary would begin with general training (the primary mission of the national educational system), possibly followed by basic vocational or technical training on a full-time basis (Vocational Studies Certificate [BEP], for example) and would conclude with alternating training aimed at labour-market entry (vocational *baccalauréat*). In order to create such training paths, the Regional Council proposed relying "strongly on the infrastructure of the vocational and technical high schools" in order to avoid fruitless rivalries and a costly multiplication of pedagogical equipment and structures. This strategy has taken the form of training units by alternance (*unités de formation par alternance*, or UFAs) set up under the pedagogical authority of a school principal by agreement between the latter and an alternating training organisation for the occupation concerned [see box below].

PROFILE OF A TYPICAL UFA

* The UFA is created on the initiative of the activity sector.

* The employers' organisation signs an agreement with a public or private technical or vocational institution for the creation of an alternating training programme.

* The employers request the approval of the Regional Council; this leads to a formal agreement fixing the number of apprentices and the amount of the annual subsidy.

* A board of managers, consisting of equal numbers of employer and school representatives, is responsible for overseeing the administrative, pedagogical and budgetary operation of the UFA.

* A preliminary selection of candidates is carried out by the employers with the assistance of the training body.

* The training content and organisation of the alternance are defined under the responsibility of the principal in close relationship with the apprenticeship supervisors or mentors in the company, taking into account the system of reference for the diploma.

WEAK QUANTITATIVE RESULTS: AN AMBIGUOUS AGREEMENT AMONGST THE PARTNERS

In 1992-1993, the last year that the regional programmation was implemented, the training flow from co-operative apprenticeship remained modest:

• 8 percent of the young people preparing for the vocational *baccalauréat* in the Rhône-Alpes region had recourse to the apprenticeship system (which is far from the 30 % projected in order to create an impact on the whole of the vocational training system).

• One-quarter of those opting for apprenticeship (i.e., only 2 % of those young people preparing for the vocational *baccalauréat*) had recourse to the UFA mechanism.

As of 1 January 1994, a total of fifty-nine UFAs were in operation; while more than 1,500 young people in the region had obtained a vocational diploma at Level IV (notably the vocational *baccalauréat*) and level III (higher technicians' certificates), there were less than a thousand first-year entrants into the UFAs. Nearly a third of these are preparing for diplomas in tertiary fields, as opposed to only 28 percent in manufacturing fields, which are the

4. See Jean-Louis Kirsch, "New Directions for Vocational Education in France" *Training and Employment* 15 (Spring 1994).

privileged target of the region's policy. On the other hand, the important share of construction trades (nearly one-quarter of the young people) reflects the very strong commitment of employers' organisations in this branch to the programme.

This modest development has several explanations, the most important of which is the ambiguity of the co-operation agreement between the three main partners: the Regional Council, the occupational branches and the national educational system (the school boards).

Indeed, while there was consensus about the need for combatting youth unemployment and upgrading the status of vocational training, each of the partners soon revealed the limits of its commitment:

• For the national educational system, which had begun to develop school-based alternating training with the creation of the vocational *baccalauréats*, co-operative apprenticeship was simply one model amongst others. It found school-based alternating training particularly relevant in occupational fields utilising high technologies applied to extremely intangible processes (e.g., electronics or chemistry). This powerful internal dynamic was even further reinforced by the persistently widespread reluctance among teachers relative to any collaboration with employers which might give the latter a dominant role.

• For the Employers' Union, the diversity of interests from one branch to another made caution the rule. The metal-working industry sought to maintain the training centres it had developped itself and saw co-operative apprenticeship as a dangerous source of competition. Conversely, the construction industries committed themselves intensively for three reasons: the need for the rapid creation of the "master-worker" qualifications (technician and journeyman) corresponding to the vocational *baccalauréat*; the concern for renewing an aging work force while improving the image of the building trades through the assistance of the national educational system; finally, the impetus given by a particular building contractor who was an elected member of the Regional Council and president of its vocational training committee.

• For the Regional Council, two priorities co-existed ambiguously: one consisted of meeting the families' educational demands by providing high schools with equipment and operating budgets for their traditional academic programmes, while the other was aimed at encouraging the running of the training system by employers' organisations and companies through "co-operative apprenticeship".

In fact, the compromise amounted to limiting the development of this new programme, as attested by the minimal effort expended on the first experiments amongst the young people and the companies. In addition, by the end of 1991, with the economic situation in sharp decline, employers were forced to be very cautious about the commitment involved in signing a work contract, while school-based training only required them to receive trainees on a temporary basis.

DIVERSE APPROACHES, PROMISING RESULTS

This experience nonetheless revealed forms of co-operation that went beyond the original plan. Four kinds of alternating training units emerged from initiatives of various origins:

1) *The occupational branches.* Following the initial model, these efforts depend on a branch initiative (as in construction) and close co-operation with the schools (four cases out of ten). The employers' organisation assumes responsibility for analysing the companies' future needs, determines the number of trainees and plays an active role in canvassing the companies in order to place the young people under apprenticeship contracts. The relevant departments of the national educational system are responsible for evaluating the pedagogical potential of the schools and obtaining the participation of their administrations and teachers.

2) *Large companies' initiatives* for incorporating high-quality apprenticeship in their human-relations management policies. The Regional Council's policy provides a favourable context for a commitment that sometimes goes against the reservations of their branch organisation, as was the case with the UFA created on the initiative of the auto manufacturer Renault.

3) *Predominance of training centres* (one-third of the cases), whose participation involves inter-occupational skills, notably in the tertiary sector. Given the weakness of the employers' organisations and the scattered needs of the companies, the co-operation is structured by the training supply and often obey short-term rationales developped by private organisations seeking new markets.

4) *Mobilisation of local activity sectors and institutions* associating, on the level of a job pool, a small number of companies, a vocational high school and often an elected official seeking to promote the area he or she represents. Such a model relies on relations established prior to the regional initiative which, in this case, provides the means of implementing the local partners' projects.

The Rhône-Alpes region's initiative showed that an apprenticeship based on active co-operation between schools and companies was possible and proved that a balance could be found between the commitment of companies that hire young people, at least for the training period, and the training institutions that provide the necessary pedagogical structures. Furthermore, the quality of the collaboration usually avoids one of the common

shortcomings of the "classic", craft-type apprenticeship: the simple juxtaposition of in-company periods and academic courses without any real pedagogical organisation of the alternation. In addition, the UFA experience showed that the same institutional framework could give rise to varied initiatives reflecting the different ways in which the training-employment relationship is regulated: by the local labour market, the human relations management of the large companies and the policies of the occupational branches.

FROM EXPERIMENTATION TO INNOVATION

At this stage, however, we are still far from a stabilised mechanism which is likely to make a significant improvement in the vocational training system. The transition from experimentation to innovation presupposes the definition of more explicit forms of organisation and regulation in the following areas:

• *Recognising the variety of initiatives* underlying the co-operation between companies and training organisations and integrating them into a regional management for all vocational training programmes, regardless of their status. The competition between the different tracks must be regulated in order to avoid creating additional costs and making the overall system incomprehensible to young people and companies alike.

• *Guaranteeing the accumulation of pedagogical innovations* in order to encourage alternating training which does not simply associate school and company but integrates their respective contributions in the building of competence. Two conditions must be met:

- Creating a body of "middlemen" (inspectors from the national educational system and specialists from the employers' organisations) to navigate between the local experiments and their regional (or even national) accreditation.

- Recognising and validating the occupational experience of the young apprentices, who are presently required to meet the standards developped for school-based training examinations while fulfilling the companies' job requirements (which meant that access to the UFA programme was very selective).

• *Clarifying the methods of financing alternating training* and the respective contributions of the companies, the Regional Council and the national educational system. In terms of the school system in particular, should teacher participation come under regular contract hours or rather, as is most often the case at present, overtime? What recompense is given to teachers who commit themselves to a format that is more demanding than school-based training?

• *Distinguishing between short-term labour-market entry and the creation of a basic occupational skill.* The latter requires a relatively stable framework in order to make the necessary pedagogical investments both possible and profitable. The former often depends on *complementary* training courses adapted to an immediate need and not necessarily related to obtaining a national diploma.

The Rhône-Alpes experiment is likely to become a model because the five-year employment plan, passed by the Parliament in Autumn 1993, extends the possibility of instituting such a programme throughout France. This "French-style" dual system, for the moment experimental and potential, reveals the decisive role of the national educational system in directing the overall operation. Contrary to the German situation, the school systems' pedagogical competences are indisputable, while in-company facilities for instruction remain rudimentary. All of these circumstances confirm the conclusions of an official report stressing the need to improve the image of technical education by starting with its basic structure: the vocational high school [Tanguy 1991]. However, it is also necessary for the companies to recognise these training programmes in their job classifications and to offer motivating careers for the young people who opt to enroll in them.

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